



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE ON TRIAL¹

WILLIAM TRUFANT FOSTER

Bowdoin College

The American college is on trial. Capital charges are preferred by Mr. Clarence F. Birdseye and Mr. Abraham Flexner:

Mr. Birdseye: Our culture courses are too often, and by the confession of our best educators, the soft courses that are but wishy-washy excuses for sloth, indifference, neglect, and ill-concealed ridicule of the study and its teacher. . . . The former system of mental and moral discipline has substantially passed away and no real or efficient substitute has been found for it. . . . The awful fact is that for thirty years we have been debauching the moral character of our college youths by helping them to devise and carry out the deceit, chicanery, dishonesty, and dishonorableness of modern intercollegiate athletics. . . . (Witness) the evident palsy of the college authorities and alumni and their fatal inability to grasp the situation or propose a solution.²

Mr. Flexner: At each of the critical junctures of the boy's education the college fails in pedagogical insight. . . . A degree may be won with little or no systematic exertion. . . . Our college students are, and for the most part emerge, flighty, superficial, and immature, lacking, as a class, concentration, seriousness, and thoroughness. . . .

These are the capital charges. To sustain them, a formidable body of expert witnesses for the prosecution are called into court.

Mr. Woodrow Wilson takes the stand: The nation needs trained and disciplined men, men who know, and who can think; men who can conceive and interpret, whose minds are accustomed to difficult tasks and questions. . . . Such men it is not getting by the present processes of college life.³

¹ Read at the annual meeting of the Harvard Teachers' Association, March, 1909.

² Clarence F. Birdseye, *Individual Training in Our Colleges* (Macmillan).

³ Address of President Woodrow Wilson, of Princeton University, at Haverford College, 1909.

Mr. Harry Garfield: The charge of vagueness of aim brought against the American college is, in part, at least, well founded, and to this fact is largely due the weakening of intellectual stamina observed among undergraduates.⁴

Mr. Jacob Gould Schurman: The college is without clear-cut notions of what a liberal education is . . . and the pity of it is that this is not a local or special disability, but a paralysis affecting every college of arts in America.⁵

Mr. Barrett Wendell: All over the world the traditional methods and systems of education have been tried and found wanting. . . . College education today is chiefly notable for its ineffectiveness. . . . There are few colleges of America in which we are not often confronted with bachelors of arts who are virtually uneducated.⁶

Mr. Wallace C. Sabine: They are allowed to loaf through their college without having to put that energy and ambition into their studies necessary to the formation of a strong character.

Mr. William E. Byerly: The student spends one-half of his time in the lecture-room, and stands about as much chance of gaining mental vigor as he would of gaining vigor of body by sitting on the bleachers and cheering his college team.

Mr. George P. Baker: I am more and more surprised to find that many of these (Seniors and Juniors) have no real interest in knowing how to think well.⁷

Mr. Charles Francis Adams: The whole situation . . . today stands in crying need of reform.⁸

Mr. George Burton Adams: Both these lines of attack (against the college, the professional school from above, and the high school from below) are still vigorously pressed, and the outcome is not yet apparent.⁹

Mr. J. McKeen Cattell: The college is . . . a club for the idling classes. . . . It is not at all clear why the public should pay a thousand dollars for the expenses of each boy who goes through college to enjoy the pleasures of drinking-clubs and betting on athletics.¹⁰

⁴ Inaugural Address of President Harry Garfield, of Williams College, 1908.

⁵ *Report of the President of Cornell University*, 1907-08.

⁶ *The Privileged Classes in America* (Scribners, 1908).

⁷ "The Mind of the Undergraduate," *Educational Review*, September, 1905.

⁸ Phi Beta Kappa Address at Columbia University.

⁹ "The College in the University," *Educational Review*, February, 1907.

¹⁰ *Popular Science Monthly*, January, 1909.

Mr. Elbert Hubbard: I would have every man have a college education in order that he might see how little the thing is really worth. . . . It is the most gigantic illusion of the age.¹¹

Mr. Edward L. Thorndike: The traditional entrance examinations . . . do not prevent incompetence from getting into college; do not prevent students of excellent promise from being discouraged, improperly conditioned, or barred out altogether; do not measure fitness for college well enough to earn the respect of students or teachers, and do intolerable injustice to individuals.¹²

Mr. James G. Croswell: Work as work is, for some reason, not sufficiently respected in American colleges.¹³

Mr. R. C. Bentley: "At the best, the academic college has been the pedagogical football of university presidents. . . . The present effect of its effort to adapt itself to the great numbers who in recent years have flocked into the college, has been next to disastrous to high ideals of scholarship."¹⁴

Mr. Stephen Leacock: The literary sterility of America (is appalling). The American student's ignorance of all things except his own part of his own subject, has grown colossal.¹⁵

Mr. LeBaron R. Briggs: There is in the college today too much teaching and too little studying. . . . The average amount of study is discredibly small. . . . Our instructors, as a body, deceive themselves as to the amount of work which their courses require.¹⁶

Mr. Risk, of Glasgow: It is a great country, America. In university matters, as in social and political affairs, it does not know where it is going; but it is determined to get there.¹⁷

¹¹ *New England Magazine*, February, 1909.

¹² *Educational Review*, May, 1906.

¹³ *Educational Review*, February, 1909.

¹⁴ Dean R. C. Bentley, in *Clark College Record*.

¹⁵ *The University Magazine*, February, 1909.

¹⁶ Report of a Committee of the Harvard Faculty, Dean L. B. R. Briggs, chairman.

¹⁷ Articles in the *Glasgow Herald*, on "America at College." Nor have Oxford and Cambridge escaped. Lord Rosebery has recently lamented the wasted opportunities of his own university career and denounced the temptations to idleness which beset the Oxford student of today. And Charles Darwin has said, "During the three years which I spent at Cambridge, my time was sadly wasted there and worse than wasted."

Such are the witnesses for the prosecution. And a crowd is knocking loudly at the courtroom doors, eager to give still more damaging testimony. We need not hear them one by one. The *Nation* sums up their complaints in declaring that "there is only too much concrete evidence to justify the complaint that college students are lacking in spontaneous and disinterested intellectual activity." "There is hardly a college in the country whose bachelor's degree is a genuine certificate of intellectual discipline." And the *Dial* adds, "The steadily increasing ignorance, on the part of our young college men, of matters absolutely essential to any kind of education that deserves to be called liberal, is nothing less than an educational scandal. . . . Our modern society has thought to relieve itself of educational responsibility by multiplying the mere machinery of education. . . . Many students nowadays get from their college life little but educational disadvantages." The *Columbia University Quarterly* (December, 1908) concludes that "the question really is not whether there should be radical changes in the American college, but what the changes should be."

Here, then, are present educational needs. And yet all this is hopeful. It would seem that there is not a defect in the whole broad realm of human possibilities but the college, sooner or later, must take the blame for it. This shows the great faith of the American people in the innate power of the college. And, after all, the American people are the jury, and the jury has spoken.

What more practical verdict could one ask than college registration statistics? Every year from 1889 to 1909 has seen a larger enrolment of college students. In 1889 there were 44,926 men students; today there are over 100,000. In 1889 there were 10,761 women students; today there are over 40,000. The total increase in seventeen years is over 150 per cent., an increase out of all proportion to gains in population. From 1902 to 1905 the registration of the small colleges in New England increased over 20 per cent.; and the rate continues until the question becomes how much longer we shall have any small colleges. This year all the eastern colleges for men, and all

those for women except one, report a registration larger than that of the previous year.

Here, then, is the American public staking their sons, their daughters, and their millions, on their faith in the possibilities of the college, and yet agreeing, on the whole, with the verdict of the *Nation* that "the college is the least satisfactory part of our educational system and has urgent need to justify itself." This seems an anomalous condition—our colleges growing rapidly both in numbers and in popular disapproval. And yet it may not be difficult to trace causal connections.

First, however, we may consider some of the proposed remedies. Among these the one urged with most insistence and with the greatest weight of authority is the return to the classics as the backbone of the college course. Mr. Charles Francis Adams would have Latin and Greek required from the first year of high school to the last year of college. Mr. John Corbin contends that in responding to the modern scientific impulse we have renounced the function of mental training and character-building.¹⁸ This is an easy and a common explanation of our failings; but it ignores the fact that no one has yet been able to prove that the so-called culture subjects are inherently better fitted than the sciences for mental training and character-building; and it ignores the fact that such institutions as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are actually serving these ends better than many an institution that is said to be devoted to humanistic culture.

And certainly no such remedy would satisfy our most voluminous critics. Says Mr. Birdseye, "The cry is for more culture, without any real appreciation that on present lines this means more mental and moral shiftlessness and slouchiness, if not degeneracy." Says Mr. Flexner, the results of culture courses are a "premium on laziness, mental sloth, carelessness and inaccuracy, moral perversion." And Dean Briggs's committee appears to support these contentions, in reporting that "the easiest way to induce students to take a subject for culture is to make it not too difficult. . . . Because recognized as a culture

¹⁸ *Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1909.

course (it tends to grow) softer and more general." Assuming that Professor Wendell is right in declaring that the one great need is the power of voluntary attention that was formerly secured through the humanities, yet the defenders of the classics have not yet revealed anything in their substance that makes them better adapted than a dozen other subjects for cultivating this power of voluntary attention. If, as Mr. Wendell seems to contend,¹⁹ the subject-matter of a course must be lifeless, and useless, and therefore uninteresting, in order to give the needed discipline, then ingenious and hard-hearted pedagogues—especially if newly robed in doctors' gowns—can ride their hobbies—metaphysics, counterpoint, Egyptian archaeology, to go no further—into battlefields as dull and unprofitable as those in which the knights of the classics rode their steeds—and the boys their ponies—in the lamented days of yore. The fact is that, in view of present educational needs, the advocates of the classics have not made out their case.

Mr. Flexner's remedies are not as convincing as his charges. He declares that "the educational field is now free for constructive effort; for a positive, not a negative, doctrine." First he would reassert the priority of the college by removing the pernicious influence of the graduate schools. He here asserts a conspicuous educational need, though it should be noted that the presence of graduate schools does not render necessary—though it does render possible—the employment of young, temporary, inexperienced, underpaid instructors, whose chief interests are outside their classes. Moreover, this remedy at best applies only to the minority of university colleges, not to the majority of detached colleges which seem to many critics in quite as great need of reform. As a second remedy, he would remove all restraints from the secondary schools. In place of examinations, he would have us consider mainly "range, seriousness, and cohesiveness of previous study," ignoring the fact that our present certificate and examination systems attempt, with what meager success we are all aware, to test precisely "these really vital facts"—and he does not propose a definite substitute.

¹⁹ "The Privileged Classes in America."

Concerning college studies he says, "Imminent vocational and professional necessities should there largely determine both the content of the curriculum and the form of the instruction." Thus he appears to meet the charge of "vagueness of aim" by giving the college no aim whatever, and therefore no place in life, distinct from that of vocational and professional schools. His further concrete suggestions are that college faculties should be recruited in part from secondary-school teachers, that American history should be a required study, and, by far the most important suggestion of his book, the overthrowing of numerical and commercial standards of success. And yet, after reading his 214 pages of condemnation, and his 22 pages on "The Way Out," one cannot but believe that the educational field is still free for constructive effort.

Mr. Birdseye's conception of present educational needs is still less convincing. He has little hope from the faculty. The alumni, especially the fraternity alumni, must reform the college. And yet, a little college in Worcester, without fraternities or alumni, has in the last eight years made more original experiments in the solution of college problems than any of our old fraternity colleges; and some college faculties believe that they could readily reform the fraternities themselves, if the younger alumni would but keep away for a college generation.

"Our colleges need more than anything else," says Mr. Birdseye, "a long-continued panic, not in money, but in men and everything else." If Mr. Birdseye were to take a trip through the West and the South, he would find college panics to his heart's content. Indeed he would find colleges that are always in a panic. These have been selected by the General Education Board for benevolent elimination. He seems to miss the heart of college problems, and to abandon his favorite factory analogy in its most illuminating details, by insisting that the practice of dropping students is one cause of the failure of our modern colleges to turn out a creditable product; and he praises the earlier colleges because—wonder of wonders—there were "practically no instances of discipline for poor scholarship!" (The exclamation point is mine.) In the whole book I find no emphasis on the joys

of scholarship for its own sake—no hint of its need—yet without that the American college can never answer the present charges, can never merit a place in American life.

The method of revealing this joy in pure scholarship to undergraduates that has been hailed with greatest interest is the Princeton plan. The prevailing idea seems to be that there is some marvelous force in the plan itself that at once turns shiftless idlers into earnest students. The fact is that the success of the plan is due to the power of the men chosen as preceptors and to the backbone of the administration. The plan itself could be applied to many an institution, under present management, without providing sufficient incentive to hard work. It is a mistake to suppose that even at Princeton the plan has succeeded in lifting the submerged tenth to a plane of passable scholarship. On the contrary, 66 men were dropped from the class of 1907 in freshman year, 61 from the class of 1908, and 50 from the class of 1909—a total of 680 in the last six years. A like insistence on excellence in scholarship and a like indifference to numbers would result, with or without the preceptor system, in revolutionizing any decadent college. And whether the college lived or died, the result would aid the solution of our college problems.

Others propose as a remedy that we “desert the kindergarten mechanism of marks and grades.”²⁰ Mr. Birdseye, for instance, would have us abandon our A, B, C, D, E devices, and “mark each for quickness, energy, attention, accuracy, judgment, perseverance,” unmindful of the fact that the marks are but convenient symbols for indicating, as far as instructors are able, the success with which these very powers have been applied to given tasks. And this, by the way, is precisely what his ideal football coach—his model for college professors—attempts to do on the gridiron. Curious, is it not, that, when a person unacquainted with school administration undertakes to reform the schools, he usually begins with the assumption that marks and grades are dear to every teacher’s heart, because of the pettiness of his interests. But as for a superior, working substitute—that is not the business of the critic!

²⁰ Dean R. C. Bentley, in *Clark College Record*, July, 1906.

Most harmful of all causes of the present weakness of American colleges is the lack of educational insight and moral courage, to which must be ascribed the failure of college faculties to maintain standards of scholarship and conduct at the expense of enrolment numbers and tuition fees. And here, I would avoid, if possible, the exaggeration and unwarranted generalization, to which college critics are prone, by asserting, once for all, that I am speaking from my own observation of a hundred institutions, east and west, and that I leave each person to make such exceptions as his experience, or his loyalty, seems to warrant.

My point is that colleges have frequently shown slackness, and narrowness of vision, if not laziness and cowardice and dishonesty, in letting down the standards of admission in order to get students in and then lowering the college work in order to keep them in. The colleges are in a mad race for numbers—a race in which the goal is inefficiency, in which, therefore, the only colleges that can win honor are those that drop out. Let us see if this is not the main condition that balks the solution of our vexed college problems.

Shall admission to college be by certificate or by examination? As long as the condition just described prevails, neither plan can give satisfaction. Consider the certificate system. Boys the country over are certified on almost any basis other than their genuine accomplishment of the catalogue requirements, or their fitness to do genuine college work. Many authorities first consider what college the candidate wishes to attend, and then fill out the certificate with due consideration to the laxity of the college. The weakling then enters to make the college still laxer. Thus a vicious circle is run, tending always to the demoralization of the college. For if the college is sufficiently eager for numbers and weak in backbone, the school cannot suffer at the hands of the Certificate Board, no matter how absurd its certificates. Again, I know principals who will certify a boy in subjects in which he is utterly unprepared, say Latin or mathematics, provided the boy will go to a college where these subjects are not required, and promise not to elect them. For in that case, also, the Certificate Board has no evidence against the school. Then, too, I know of

principals who will refuse to grant certificates, in order to induce boys to go to colleges that require neither certificates nor examinations. Again the school is "protected." If sufficiently clever, it can stay on the approved list forever. From the college standpoint, the condition is still worse. For instance, a high-school principal writes me that he refused to certify one boy in physics and chemistry, because "he had practically no knowledge of the elements of these subjects." For the same reason, he refused another boy a certificate in physics and trigonometry. The latter "was accepted without condition," and the former was accepted in physics, by a university that is a member of the New England Certificate Board. Thus the school was "protected," because the university violated the vital principle of the whole certificate system. Common honesty is a present educational need.

Let us see to what lowering of standards the desire for numbers leads, through the admission of candidates who are not prepared for college. On this point, current catalogues almost invariably conceal the truth. "Nine of these subjects must be presented," they say, or "Twenty-nine points are required." Rarely do they mention the number of points a candidate may fail to offer and yet be admitted. The Carnegie Foundation rightly insists that the printed statements of the entrance requirements of its approved colleges shall meet its standard. Williams College was obliged to change its requirements from 14 to 14½ points, before it could be listed as a first-class college. Bowdoin College had to add a few pages of French. All the while it must be evident that the significant fact regarding the standard of admission is not the promise of the catalogue, but the performance of the college. We must know first, what a point means *outside* the catalogue, and second, how many of the "required" points are required.

At best, in admitting a boy "with conditions," we as much as say to him, "You are not prepared for college. You have failed to meet our standard. Nevertheless, we will allow you to enter and try to do college work in the same classes with those who are prepared, and in addition to your college work, we require you to 'make up' these conditions." By such inconsistency we increase

the difficulty of all those instructors who are endeavoring to keep the whole student body faithfully at work. Last year Harvard College admitted 58 per cent. of its 607 men as deficient candidates, yet Harvard is far from being the greatest sinner among us. Unless our devices for estimating the fitness of candidates by certificate and examination are useless, those students most heavily conditioned on entrance must be, as a class, least fitted to do college work. Yet on just this class we impose the heaviest additional burdens, making at the same time scarcely any provisions—in some colleges, absolutely no provisions—for assisting these least competent students in carrying these extra burdens. The inevitable and most conspicuous result is the dragging-down of the work of all the college classes. Those who are forced to make up extra work, as best they may, lower the standard of college work for all the others; and it is the others, though the fact seems seldom perceived, who suffer most. We should declare all candidates either prepared or unprepared, do away with “entrance conditions,” and thus free the college work from the drag of the unreasonable burdens placed on those least fit to bear them.

Still further to dim the hope of securing serious study and sustained application from our students, most of us send off groups of them, by no means those who can best afford the time, on advertising trips—musical clubs, dramatic clubs, fraternity conventions, and no end of athletic teams. Gloss it over as we may with specious reasoning about “make-up” work, it is still evident that, if a week at college classes means any real intellectual accomplishment, the progress of the good students who remain faithfully at their work must eventually be seriously retarded by the poorer students who are constantly dropping into the same classes, after excused absences for outside activities. Though I would not abolish these activities—for there is some good in all of them, with the possible exception of minstrel shows—my remedy is yet radical. I would grant no special excuses whatever for neglect of college work, and I would then allow these outside activities to adjust themselves, as best they could, to those chief inside activities for which the college exists

and without which it cannot successfully meet the serious charges now brought against it.

How this senseless rush for numbers has weakened the backbone of college administration, and justified some of the adverse testimony we have heard, is conspicuously illustrated by intercollegiate athletics. "We must do as others do;" "to attract students we must win games at any cost." These are the hidden motives that prompt our present athletic policies. No college is too small to feel that it must have as many teams, as many games, as much paraphernalia, and, at any cost to scholarship, as big an automatic cheering section at every game as the largest university. Indeed, the smallness of the college, far from restricting such activities, is used as evidence of the need of more and more, in order that the college may become larger. Of the 480 institutions ranked as colleges by the U. S. Commissioner of Education, 340 are reported as having less than 200 students. How many of the faculties of these colleges, shutting their ears to popular clamor, and the certain disfavor of students and alumni, disregarding the supposed needs of advertising and the pernicious argument that "what others do, we must do," how many would be so bold as to assert—indeed is there one that would assert—that intercollegiate athletics, as conducted by these small colleges, best promote those objects whereby alone the American college can hope to justify its existence in the face of the serious charges now brought against it? Yet with what pusillanimous indecision have we dallied with the whole matter for twenty years! And what bold surgeons we have thought ourselves when we have treated the malady by cutting down a schedule from twenty-two games to twenty! And what a sorry chance, all this time, the still, small voice of scholarship has had against the yelling of thirty thousand at a football game!

"Gains" in numbers! Every fall we hear that this college and that has made great "gains" in numbers. And yet we have no idea whether there have been gains in any vital sense until we know, first, what proportion of those admitted are qualified to pursue the courses offered, and, second, whether there has been a corresponding increase in the number and efficiency of the

faculty. Since 1902, the only institutions that exhibit a "loss" in registration are Princeton and Harvard; yet there are many careful students of college education who believe that no institutions during this period have made greater gains in efficiency. This is not a mere coincidence. The dropping of 680 incompetents in six years at Princeton, and the "loss" this year of 48 "specials" at Harvard, has a meaning in genuine progress precisely opposite to the so-called great "gains" of some other colleges. Americans must rid themselves of the notion that there is any credit *per se* in enrolment "gains." Any college—without exception—can increase its numbers if it is willing to pay the price; just as, on the same terms, jail birds can be elected to political office in some American cities. Conversely, any college, without exception, can increase its efficiency if it is willing to pay the price, which, under present conditions, will inevitably be a falling-off in numbers. Innumerable devices to coax boys to work have failed in cases where the one thing needful was to convince them, by the evidence of enforced discipline, that they must work or leave college.

There is no college to take issue with President Garfield in his inaugural declaration that "the men against whom we should close the doors promptly and effectually are those who loaf because they choose to and who do not propose to change their occupation." Yet, unless the experts called by the prosecution are bearing false witness, our colleges harbor many men against whom the doors should be closed on the charge of "miscellaneous worthlessness."

Backbone in administration and educational insight, we certainly need—courage based on conscious resources. But more enlightened leadership we are not likely to secure without further organization and interpretation of contemporary experience. In Mr. Wendell's entertaining book, beyond his call for the power of voluntary attention which he thinks can best be developed through the classics, there are few concrete suggestions except first, his sarcastic flings at the scientific training of teachers, and second, his assertion that we must try new experiments, honestly and generously—two suggestions which those of us who have

faith in the professional study of education regard as sharply inconsistent. For we believe, rightly or wrongly, that one reason why we have seen so little light ahead and stumbled so much, is because we have had too much mere opinion in the dreary wastes of educational writings, often from persons who scoff at pedagogy, and too little scientific study of education. We believe, with Professor Hanus, that the chief reason why we seem always bound nowhere under full sail, is that we have failed to organize our educational experience. Hypotheses concerning college education must be submitted to the same rigorous and far-reaching statistical tests as hypotheses in physics and geology. Only thus can we hope to free our college administration from the fate that befalls every human undertaking concerning which everybody knows a little and nobody knows much.